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ABSTRACT

Rituals are often present at times of tension, change, and uncertainty and they perform important and diverse functions at such times. They are, however, virtually absent at one important and increasingly common event, divorce. Families do draw upon rituals to deal with in-law relationships following divorce. This report stemmed from a research project on the role of grandmothers in the divorces of their children. Interviews with 50 parent-grandmother dyads and with other individuals along the divorce and remarriage chains revealed how ritualized rules of interaction were used to control tension. Most members of post-divorce families must meet in chance encounters; the performance of family roles; and the celebration of ritual events entailing the children, including rituals of the calendar and transition rituals. For these individuals, rituals function at various social levels. They attempt to control the setting for interaction by creating a conflict-free or buffered zone. Divorced individuals initiate tension-reducing mechanisms of various types. Avoidance is often the most attractive option. When avoidance is not possible, observance of rules of etiquette can formalize interactions and stabilize the recognition of parental roles. Some individuals prefer to establish a joking relationship with former spouses and in-laws. Codes of etiquette allow former relatives to meet with civility during the ritual occasions which preserve continuities and integration between generations and between present and former in-laws. (NB)

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Socially Controlled Civility:

The Functioning of Ritual in the Divorce Process

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Socially Controlled Civility:
The Functioning of Rituals in the Divorce Process

Virtually everywhere, rituals are prominent at times of tension, change, and uncertainty. Rituals perform important and diverse functions. They convey a pattern of meaning at important life events. For example, rites of passage explicate biological processes of birth, growth and development, and death, and in doing so they delineate the most fundamental categories of age and sex. As Meyerhoff (1984) had noted, rituals are markers of the passage of time, in which the events of the life cycle are recognized and the past is integrated into the present and future, signifying continuity of the social order. Through the repetitive, patterned and predictable actions, they meet cognitive and affective needs for a comprehensible and understandable social world. In the process, a message of order, continuity and stability is conveyed. Because ritual events are social events entailing social interactions, they also provide socially integrative mechanisms which strengthen the social order. Since rituals are forms of socially monitored communication, they also provide metacommunications on the social order and the prevailing hierarchy (Leach, 1968).

Most current research on rituals view these phenomena as a process rather than a finite event (Moore and Meyerhoff, 1977: Schwartzman, 1982; Turner, 1969). Researchers have noted that these observances entail stages which are marked by separation, marginality, and then aggregation and integration. During the period of separation, one is detached from earlier fixed points in the social structure and from a set of cultural directives. Then there is a stage of reintegration and reincorporation into a new status. This process of segmentation and separation prefaces the occasions when individuals come together at a higher developmental stage but only

after a period where they are differentiated from both their old and their new status. In other words, rituals function to facilitate changes in relationships in a socially approved manner, as new habits and thoughts come into synchrony with the cultural context. The basic premises of the group are maintained, yet individuals are permitted to change. Rituals are socially prescribed techniques that recognize and permit changes in relationships at various stages in the life cycle and in this capacity, they act to stabilize the social group by preventing social relationships from breaking down.

While we commonly think of rituals as celebrations of individual transitions or the passage of time, rituals also function at the more mundane level of daily interactions, when encounters are ritualized and prescribed by social conventions. As Irving Goffman has so convincingly documented (1961; 1967), ritualization of behavior in social interaction is an important social process operating to convey a predictable social world. The mutual observances of rules of ritualized social interactions offer a system of checks and balances which prevent individuals from abrogating social conventions and creating conflict and disorder. In the process of following these rules in social interactions, participants expect that each will protect the other's self esteem, and if successful, their social environment will be less tension filled.

From a cross-cultural perspective, our culture is noted for de-emphasizing both ritual observances and ritualized rules of etiquette. Americans are noted for being casual and familiar, and in many settings they are less scrupulous about formalities than is the case in many cultures. It also is commonly noted that important life events, when they are recognized, are more secular rather than sacred, with celebrations

less complex and less elaborately performed in our culture. If rituals then function at periods of strain and uncertainty, one needs to look at such periods in order to identify whether ritual observances and ritualized behaviors function to reduce conflict and ameliorate tension.

Rituals are virtually absent at one important and increasingly common event, that of divorce, even though major rearrangments in the household, family and kinship relations take place. In recent years, the popular media, etiquette books and advice-givers in newpapers have begun to address the uncertainties these changes create, but the social and cultural processes have not been well studied. There are three problems arising from divorce-related changes in the social structure. For one thing, there are no established practices on how one should announce a divorce to one's family and friends. Secondly, there are few established guidelines on how one should respond to news of another's divorce. As William Goode (1957) has suggested, one does not know whether to act grieved or relieved. Finally and most importantly, there are no guidelines on how those who were formerly related should interact when they meet.

This paper will report on how families draw upon rituals to deal with in-law relationships following divorce. It will analyze how rituals are used in regulating these relationships. The units of study include two overall categories. The first unit centers on the occasions for rituals themselves--life cycle events and calendric celebrations. These are to be distinguished from the second unit of analysis, ritualized behaviors or those interactions regulated by either the system of expectations which are built into the role system and the rules of ettiquette used in interaction. The purpose of this analysis is to illustrate how these social phenomena serve to reduce tensions and strains following divorce when former in-laws must meet. It is interesting to note that the ritual occasions frequently

bring together those who would prefer to be apart, and in such settings, they must call upon ritualized rules of interaction in order to control tension.

Sample and Methods

This report stemmed from a research project on the role of grandmothers in the divorces of their children. In this study, 50 parent-grandmother dyads were interviewed, as well as additional individuals along the divorce and remarriage chains. The majority of the families were selected from public divorce records of middle-class suburbs in the San Francisco Bay Area. The divorcing offspring was contacted first and a request was made to provide access to his or her mother. Opportunity sampling added a smaller group of grandmothers who in turn referred us to their divorcing child. In addition, in one-quarter of the cases, in-laws were also interviewed. The grandmothers were reinterviewed an average of fourteen months later. These women were interviewed for the third time and their children for the second time a mean of 40 months after our first contact. The mean time elapsed between the initial separation and our first contact was two years.

To control for expected variation by social class and ethnicity, the sample is confined to middle-class, white families. Approximately half of the grandmothers are maternal and half are paternal. A similar division is made by age with half of the grandmothers under 65 years and half 65 and older. The stages in the family cycle of their children also vary from families with young children to those in which the children had become independent.

The interviews were conducted shortly after the divorce and less than three years after their children's separation. By design, all grandmothers

had divorcing offspring residing in the area, but in a few cases the grandchildren had moved away in the course of the research. The custody arrangements were: maternal, 49%; paternal, 7%; joint, 20%; and undecided or mature children, 24%. With the exception of objective measures of social contact and aid, interviews were open-ended and designed to gather ethnographic data. A geneology was constructed at the third interview and each relationships on it was discussed. Individuals also completed pen and paper tests on which they placed the relationships at differing degrees of closeness and distance.

The Reorganization in the Post-divorce Family

Like the ritual process, the divorce process entails an individual's sharp break with the previous life, a period of social limbo (or liminality), and then their reintegration into a new life with a new status and roles (Levinger, 1979; Goode, 1957). The point of difference between these processes, however, is that divorce in American culture is only weakly institutionalized and rarely ritualized. Unlike the detailed, socially-defined mandates of the ritual process, the divorce process does not have normative guidelines for interactions with former in-laws, despite the fact that there have been major rearrangments in the social structure. Culturally definitions of these relatives also usually change. The law, of course, intervenes to determine custody and the division of property, but neither the formal nor informal normative system mandates how former relatives by marriage should deal with each other. Since such occasions are likely to produce tension, ritualized rules of interaction become necessary.

The situation is complicated by the ambiguous statuses of in-laws in the American kinship system (Schneider, 1968). With intact marriages, most individuals are uncertain in regard to how to categorize in-laws.

Individuals have certain responsibilities to a spouse's parents and relatives, but there are no expectations that each set of in-laws must relate to each other. As respondents frequently comment about a child's spouse's relatives, "We have nothing in common." Or "We didn't choose each other."

As noted above, there is a major rearrangment in the social structure at all levels. In the domestic unit, one adult leaves. At the dyadic level, the marriage ends and the in-law relationship legally ends. In the process, roles and relationships are renegotiated. If the marriage had produced children, communication must be maintained. While legally the marriage relationship ends, both parties of divorce retain a mutual biological relationships with the children of the marriage. An ex-spouse is the parent of one's child and that individual's parents are one's child grandparents. In the interest of the children of the marriage, most parents must attempt to stay in contact with a minimum of conflict. It is in a woman's best interests to take steps to retain her ex-spouse's parental responsibilities, and it is in a man's interest to maintain a civil relationship with his ex-wife in order to retain easy access to his children. Under the circumstances of remarriage, a more complicated situation results for both generations, for it is difficult to maintain divided loyalties between former in-laws and new in-laws. The individuals involved may share biological linkages to children in multiple marriages, so they must deal with loyalties they feel to in-laws of several marriages.

Grandparents are in a more complex situation, for their status is derived and their access must come from the parents of their grandchildren. With divorce, the relationship with one of those parents ends legally, yet as noted above, they continue to share a biological linkage to children of the former marriage. The noncustodial grandparents

must find some means to gain access to their grandchildren if their own child cannot provide it. Thus, the relationship is difficult to dissolve if both want to maintain contact with their biological heir. A son's wife is no longer a daughter-in-law after the divorce, but she remains the mother of her grandchildren. Her parents are the grandchildren's other grandparents. This shared biological linkage is the major justification reported to us for retaining in-law relationship.

There is invariably a heightened emotional dimension to relationships not only between the divorcing parties but also among their parents, relatives, and friends. Ritual events, which involve the children of the marriage as leading participants, bring these individuals into potentially conflict-laden relationships. Given the significance of these events to the children of the dissolved marriage and the high potential for conflict, there is a need for socially-monitored and controlled interactions such as those codified in rules of etiquette. Our society has numerous etiquette books which elucidate proper codes of behavior, but apparently these are not adequate guidelines for today's family system. Advice-givers in daily newspapers receive frequent letters asking how to deal with the problems of in-laws and step relations following divorce.

Earlier copies of Emily Post and Amy Vanderbilt have sections on divorce having to do with such practices as keeping a married name or wearing wedding rings. They also give examples of how to word invitations and announcements if the parents of the bride and groom are divorced. They have little to say, however, about more detailed rules on bringing together the formerly married and their parents in a controlled and civil interaction sequence, although they place great importance on maintaining continuity in family activities for the sake of the children.

New books, such as Miss Manners Guide to Excruciatingly Correct

Behavior is far more detailed in the treatment of our new family forms. She extols the value of maintaining good manners despite the hostility these ritualized behaviors may mask. In discussions of children's weddings and other transition rituals, she expects all participants to observe good manners and mute any hostility they may feel. With more detailed instructions, however, on where to seat parents and stepparents, how to take pictures of known enemies together, and how to control conflict, she gives no hard and fast rules. In fact, the rule of thumb she repeats often in terms of the conduct of ritual festivities is guided by how well former and current spouses and their parents get along.

The Occasions for Interactions

Throughout the divorce process, individuals must move from married status to singlehood, and on many occasions back to married status. He or she still must navigate through a network of relationships including relatives by blood, by marriage and by divorce. The latter includes ex-spouses and their parents and relatives in addition to any present or future relatives by marriage.

Few partners in post-divorce families can avoid interactions. There are three types of occasions when they may meet: 1) chance encounters, 2) the performance of family roles, 3) and the celebration of ritual events entailing their children. What is needed in any case are socially-approved mechanisms which serve to maintain contact with former in-laws, yet in a situation which is sufficiently controlled and regulated. If expectations are shared and predictable and distance is observed, then conflict is likely to be supressed. Such a process can be appropriately labeled "socially controlled civility." If successful, the needed encounters among former in-laws, which serve the best interests of the children, can

take place but in a nonconflictual atmosphere. Rituals are social mechnisms which can provide such an atmosphere.

Rituals function at least four social levels of analysis. First, they attempt to control the setting for interaction by creating a conflict-free or buffered zone. There are several criteria participants use. Meetings should take place in public settings where the actions of both individuals are observable by others who do not have vested interests in the actions or relationships in the family. The setting should also be neutral and without personalized reminders of the previous intimacy and the shared sentiments. In other words, more formal public settings provide a transition site where, for example, one can become accustomed to observing a former spouse in a new marital role or parent role. Such public settings also minimize the possibility of outbreaks of anger and conflict.

Second, divorced individuals initiate tension-reducing mechanisms of various types. If there is high conflict, avoidance is the most attractive option. If an avoidance relationship cannot be established, then interactions are usually governed by ritualized rules of etiquette. In the psychological functions of ritual as codified in rules of etiquette, the protection of the self concept is particularly prominent. One's self esteem can be attacked during the heat of conflict as the marriage is breaking up. The ideal behavior to which most respondents pay lip service is the protection of the parent role. Attempts are made to keep that role protected from abasement. "I don't badmouth him even though he is a lousy father."

In the observance of rules of etiquette, the formalization of interactions serves to stabilize the recognition of parental roles. In the absence of conflict, norms and expectations attached to social roles are

usually observed. In formal relationships, they agree on buffer zones in which controversial topics are not discussed. As one divorced woman commented, "Mother and I are always polite when my ex-husband comes to pick up the children. We make is a pleasant as possible, so it is just one less thing to worry about." Others avoid any mention of the divorce as illustrated by paternal and maternal grandparents in one divorce who are neighbors, "We are perfectly friendly when we meet, but it never seems right to discuss the divorce."

A final option is to form a joking relationship in which the formally married conduct a teasing and bantering conversation. Such relationships are commonly reported by social anthropologists who identify this option as taking place at points of structural tension. When they meet, they may have a cup of coffee or a drink, discuss their activities, and tease each other about their foibles. One mother-in-law described the teasing with her former daughter-in-law who jokes that she needs "space" from her. "I replied, `You are stuck with me for life. You are the mother of my grandchildren.'"

Rules of Etiquette during Chance Encounters. These interactions take place unexpectedly, when planning and controlling the encounter is impossible. For example, a mother may be delayed in absenting herself when her former husband comes to pick up the children, or they may meet accidentially on the street. In such cases, individuals must draw upon ritualized behaviors which are formal and impersonal. As Goffman has pointed out, in the correct observance of these rituals, one can ignore the true attitudes of others. This is accomplished through the use of formulas for salutations, controlled conversations, and polite inquiries. These formalized rules of etiquette permit ego to distance himself and maintain a large private sphere, isolated from the the original sources of tension

and insulated form the sources of one's self esteem.

The Performance of Family Roles.

Family roles are regulated by norms or expectations as to the preferred performance of the roles of grandparent, parent and child are clearly differentiated. During the divorce process, these differentiations can break down. It is common for divorcing parents to turn to their parents for help and in the process regress to a dependency not totally unlike earlier years. The children of divorce might be forced into a premature state of independence because of a parent distraction. In other cases, they become a parent's confidante and supporter, who assume a peer-like status as a recipient of information on the more intimate details of a parent's life. One function rituals perform is to delineate generational differences in role expectations and role behaviors within the reorganized family following divorce.

As noted above, the parties of divorce legally dissolve their marriage, but they do not abandon the parent role. However much rancor or alienation they may feel, they share a biological linkage to the children of the marriage and must meet on occasion to perform that role. Visitation rules entail transporting children for one house to the other. The children's school performances, recitals and other events are commonly attended by both parents. Children's birthdays and the celebration of holidays also entail arrangments in which both parents must collaborate. To minimize tension, parents form a "pact" to maintain anxiety-free encounters. These contacts are formal, distant encounters, regulated by rules of etiquette which prevent revelations of private selves.

Only when children must be transported from home to home might former spouse have to meet in less public settings. In such situations,

distancing techniques are easily used. The custodial parent can arrange to be gone when a former spouse picks up the children or can drop off the children without meeting. Should they need to communicate, they can send messages through the children. And should they meet accidentally, they can draw upon distant and polite rules of etiquette. Where there is conflict, most individuals avoid seeing each other in the home, instead preferring to communicate at the door or in a public place.

Ritual Events. Many ritual observances deal with births, marriages and deaths, so they perform important family functions over time. Blood ties are of particular importance because these transition rites celebrate the biological processes of growth and development. Most events celebrate family roles. Age norms which delineate proper behaviors and rules of familiarity or distance are also recognized by rituals.

While social distance among former in-laws may be the preferred stance for individuals, there are some occasions when former in-laws must come together. These events occur when all relatives gather to reaffirm their shared biological linkage to the children of the marriage. If old conflicts are to be avoided, such occasions for social interaction must meet the criteria discussed above. Interactions need to be controlled by formal rules of ettiquette which regulate polite but distant and formal relationships. The occasion also must be finite and last only a short time in order to prevent renewed intimacy from developing. Usually such occasions should also be in a neutral setting rather than in the intimacy and informality of the home.

Most ritual celebrations are family celebrations, and in this capacity rituals act as stabilizing forces for the family. The extent to which family rituals have been modified with divorce has not been studied systematically, although the media has widely acknowledged new forms of

extended family gatherings. Generally these are treated comically as typified by a discussion of a Bar Mitzvah. "The guest list is loaded with people who used to like each other but don't anymore; people who used to hate each other but now are quite friendly; people who used to be indifferecnt to each other and have retained their indifference. Ex-lovers, ex-spouse, ex-friends, ex-enemies" (Carroll, San Francisco Chronicle). Obviously a new social phenomenon is emerging which can give us come insights on the current family. Since these rituals are particularly important in integrating the grandparent generation, they are of more than casual interest to gerontologists.

Rituals of the Calender. The cyclical rituals, or those governed by the calender, include observances of birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays--Christmas, Thanksgiving, and so on. These celebrations are usually no problem for divorced families, for the parents can allocate the children's time by taking turns participating with the child or, for example, dividing Christmas into two celebrations. In some cases, children of divorce celebrate holidays in four homes, those of both of their parents and both sets of grandparents. Often such allocations are written into the custody arrangments and observed without conflict.

Although these celebrations do not usually entail meetings, they can recognize the social role which was the basis of their previous relationships. In the course of interviewing, we were interested in the fact that the most frequent contact between former parents-in-law and children-in-law came with the exchange of cards on Mother's Day and Father's Day even in those cases where there was considerable conflict. We interpret that to mean that the observance of this cyclical ritual was an appropriate means to recognize the social role as parent and grandparent

and the biological connection they share with the children. They were able to observe this bond without having face-to-face contact.

On other occasions, such as family reunions, some grandparents, out of preference or obligation, invite a former child-in-law to accompany their grandchildren. For example, one grandmother insisted on inviting her son's ex-wife to their fiftieth wedding anniversary despite her son's objections. Her only problem was what to call her on the name cards she was preparing. "I can't call her daughter-in-law, for I have a new one now. I could call her friend, but she is more than that--she is the mother of my grandchildren. I finally just put down 'relative'."

Transition Rituals. Those rituals which recognize the life cycle transitions are commonly referred to as rites of intensification. On such occasions when the children of divorce reach important transition points, those celebrations are the most common occasions when in-laws must come together. These rituals are of importance to all those who share a close biological tie to the child, so old conflicts and hostilities do not prevent their coming together to observe the ritual. Thus those ritual events which require tension-reducing mechanisms are most commonly the graduations and weddings of the children of divorce.

Unlike the cyclical celebrations on holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries, which are usually less formal and usually held in the intimacy of a home, weddings and often graduations meet the criteria for ritual observances which promote socially controlled civility. They often take place in a formal setting and last over a finite period of time. The formality of the occasion can act to maintain social distance and thus prevent conflict. Such social distance, however, can break down in a more relaxed atmosphere. For example, a Bar Mitzpah was observed in a temple and was attended by divorced grandparents. The grandfather had remarried, and

this celebration was the first occasion the grandmother saw her former husband with his new wife. Everything went smoothly at the temple, but once close relatives adjourned to the home of the celebrant, the controlled civility broke down. As the grandmother reported to us, "I could not stand to see her with my grandchildren on her lap, so I left in a huff."

Weddings are usually the most elaborately celebrated ritual event over the life cycle. Etiquette books give detailed instructions for all stages beginning with the selection and wording of the invitations, prenuptial celebrations, seating arrangments at the church and reception, and who stands where in receiving lines. These books also give detailed instructions on the actions of mother and father and other relatives. Not surprisingly, rules for weddings take up more pages in the etiquette books I reviewed than any other categories.

As an event which is most ritualized and bound by rules of etiquette, they can take place in an environment where conflict can be controlled. By careful seating arrangments and rules for officiating, the roles of both mother, father and child are prescribed. At elaborately stages transition rituals, when the parents or grandparents of the child being honored have remarried, the ritual event has a latent function of publicly recognizing this change in status. It also serves to recognize that the new spouse of remarriage is now a member of the family. Seating arrangments, positions in the receiving line and positioning in formal pictures are carefully planned ahead of time. These formal plans usually recognize the blood tie first and the new spouse is in the background.

At such points, spouses of remarriage must recede into the background, because it is the parent role which is being emphasized. When the wedding ceremony is over, the receiving line has dissolved, and the

reception begins, the atmosphere relaxes and ritualized interactions are replaced by more spontaneous behaviors. As the perfomance of the parent role recedes for the remarried parent of the bride or groom, that individual reassumes the new marital role. The new spouse of remarriage can function as any other guest. In other words, ritualizing this event in a carefully controlled situation provides a stable and predictable set of activities, at the same time the parent's remarriage is socially recognized in the course of the festivities.

Summary

Like the divorce process and like the status of grandparents, we do not have extablished guidelines outside these ritualized events on how to conduct relationships with former in-laws. Whether they may be friends or enemies, they, nevertheless, are individuals with whom ego shares important biological ties. Without clear guidelines, we are left with old etiquette books which extol good taste and pleasing manners. These codes of etiquette, however, serve to recognize how these relationships should be conducted, so relatives may meet with civility during ritual celebrations of the life cycle. The ritual events themselves reaffirm family continuity at the baptisms, graduations, Bar Mitzvahs and weddings of children and grandchildren.

These transition rituals elevate the celebrant to a new stage of development-- that is only one function. They also provide an occasion when each generation in the family is recognized, and parents and grandparents of past marriages, who have been legally separated, join with present and perhaps future spouses and relatives. Practically, such a meeting may facilitate change, for it can "break the ice" among enemies, encourage new patterns of interaction where amity may govern relationships, yet preserve the socially controlled civility which masks

the divisivess the divorce had created. Of course, new spouses and their parents and relatives may also be introduced into the family on such ritual occasions. Thus in bringing together people who may prefer to be apart, continuities and integration between generations and between present and former in-laws are preserved.

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